

## Agri-Science Fair: Not your typical agriculture event

The Agri-Science Fair has become one of the biggest competitive events at the state FFA Convention.

Rebecca Epps, assistant professor in the Community and Leadership Development Department at the University of Kentucky (UK), is in charge of the university's agriculture education program. She coordinated this year's agri-science event and said there were 104 registered entries this year, marking the largest number since the competition began seven years ago

"It has grown every year, and I hope to have 150 next year," she said. "As a high school agriculture teacher, this was one of my favorite competitions in which to have students participate. Word got out that if you were a freshman in my class, you had to do an Agri-Science Fair project. It's a great way to teach the scientific method. Students get to see it in action, and they really use their interest to guide their projects."

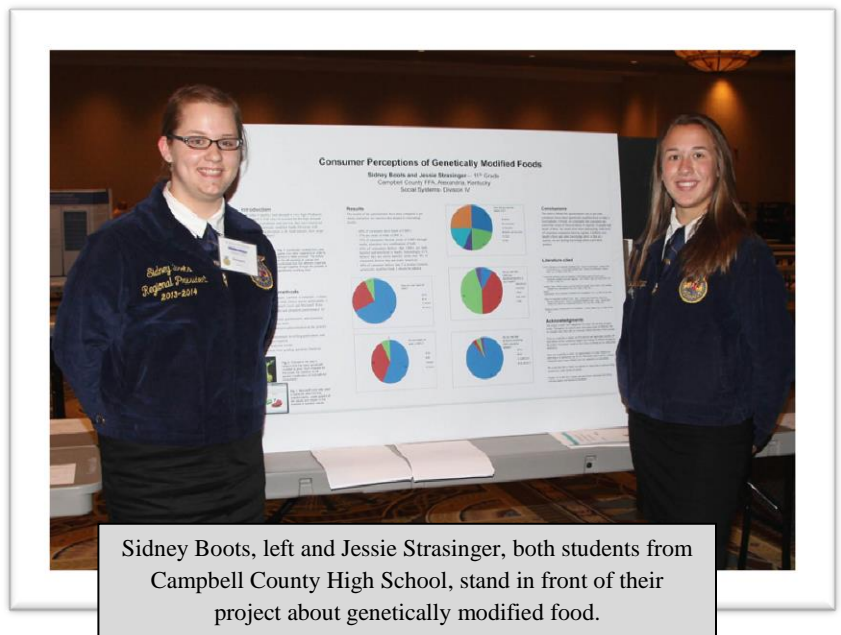
Students work throughout the year to create a variety of projects ranging from plant analysis to consumer feedback for the competition.

Epps said she asks students how they got into the project and where did it go from there – what did they learn.

The competition consists of six different categories: animal science systems; environmental and natural resources systems; food processing and product systems; plant systems; power structure technology systems; and social systems.

Within those six categories are four divisions that can be done individually or as a team. Divisions 1 and 3 are for 7th- through 9th-graders; Divisions 2 and 4 are open only to 10th-, 11th and 12th graders.

Epps, who is serving as a first-year coordinator, has judged the competition and said it is a treat to see these students progress from the 7th- and 8th-grade levels to their junior and senior years.



She also said that many who come to the fair with no ag education background are amazed at the caliber of student projects.

“Being at UK as well as having contacts at Eastern Kentucky University, I had a lot of professors come and judge, and they were all blown away at the quality that was taking place, and these are people that are scientists in horticulture or animal sciences who do not see the education part that we do on a daily basis,” Epps said.

She noted that using hands-on learning really helps the students better understand the scientific concepts of these projects.



A student competitor explains her project to one of the judges at the Agri-Science Fair held each year during the state FFA convention.

“If a student can use the scientific process and go through a project like this with an interest in agriculture, it all comes together – the classroom, the Supervised Agriculture Experience (SAE) project as well as being advised in the science application in agriculture,” Epps said.

The top winners in each category will move on to the national convention to be held

this October in Louisville. Epps said the state projects are competitive with what ag students from across the country are doing.

“I’ve been affiliated with four different states, and this one is growing by leaps and bounds,” she said. “The quality of work put forth by the chapters and students is right on par with those at the Nationals.

One of this year’s winning teams, Sidney Boots and Jessie Strasinger from Campbell County High School, conducted a survey to measure how people feel about genetically modified food (GMF). They created a poster display to show the results and provided information about the subject.

GMF is produced from genetically modified organisms, like plants that are modified to help ward off certain diseases or grow bigger, with the idea that these plants will produce more food.

“In today’s society producers are constantly faced with the challenge of producing enough food for the growing population, so one way they have done that is through GMF,” Boots said.

“However, because this food is so prevalent, we wondered how aware consumers were of these.”

The two students came up with a list of questions for the survey. Once the questionnaire was finalized, they conducted the assessment at a local grocery store, analyzed the data and drew up their conclusions. The result was a panel display with a chart to go with the information pertaining to GMF

Strasinger said the results were a “mixed bag” but that many consumers were somewhat aware of GMF.

“We found that some consumers are aware of genetically modified foods, but there’s a conflict in their knowledge of what GMF could do to them, health wise,” she said.

Both concluded that more research should be done before these types of foods are produced on a larger scale.

Matt Chaliff, agriculture education consultant with the Office of Career and Technical Education and state FFA executive secretary, said not only do projects like this help students learn more about science but can lead to broader discussion.

“The Agri-Science Fair prepares students to apply agriculture and academic knowledge to solve real-world problems both in higher education and in their future careers – it is truly ensuring that they are college- and career-ready,” he said.